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Alexandria: A History and a Guide

From Modernism Lab Essays

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Published in 1922, E. M. Forster's *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* was one of two books, along with *Pharos and Pharillon*, in which Forster sought to describe the city in which he was stationed as a Red Cross volunteer during World War I. Forster had originally traveled to Alexandria with idealistic ideas about aiding the relief effort, but, finding that "what had begun as an outpost turned into something suspiciously like a funk-hole," Forster spent his spare time researching and writing about the city in order, as he sometimes claimed, to make living there tolerable.

Forster's account of his ennui in Alexandria is a little disingenuous; he famously befriended Constantine Cavafy, the reclusive Greek poet who lived in downtown Alexandria and wrote in great part about erotic experiences in his adopted city. Forster was also part of expatriate social networks during his stay in Alexandria, and notably had his first fully realized homosexual relationship while stationed there. The texture of Forster's life in Alexandria undoubtedly informs and shapes the idiosyncratic account of the city he gives in the guide; his lover, Mohammed el Adl was a tramcar driver, whom Forster first met traveling around the city. Forster describes this tramcar route, among many others, in the second half of the guide.

The most salient feature of *Alexandria* is its structural division. Forster wrote his book in two thematically distinct parts, the first devoted to the city's history, the second to a more conventional, Baedeker-like series of walks through neighborhoods and museums, as well as excursions ranging outside the city. The history is organized roughly chronologically, beginning with the Greco-Roman period, moving on to the Christian period, and pausing for a separate analysis of Alexandrian religious life and thought during the early Christian period. Forster skips a thousand years after recounting the city's conquest by the Arabs in 641 CE, because, as he puts it, these were years "of silence," supposedly undistinguished by cultural production or interesting historical events. He picks up the narrative again with Alexandria's conquest by the Turks in the 16th century, and concludes with a discussion of the British colonial annexation of Egypt in 1882 and an impressionistic account of the British naval bombardment of Alexandria in the same year.

Between the historical narrative and the guide Forster places a translation of Cavafy's "The God Abandons Antony," acknowledging, as one editor of Forster's text, Michael Haag, observes, Cavafy's centrality to an understanding of Alexandria, and more generally the importance of literature to an understanding of the city and its history. For Forster, literary and intellectual history make Alexandria what it is. While Forster sometimes seems to suggest that he merely "tried to work in some history" (xxi) to his guide, he elsewhere explicitly states that he considers the city as such incomprehensible without a knowledge of its history, and that this history must be understood largely through a literary lens.

At a simple level, much of Forster's interest in Alexandrian history is literary or literary-historical. He cites several authorities in his prefatory material, amongst whom are a number of poets and novelists, ranging from Shakespeare to Dryden to Anatole France to Charles Kingsley. Famous literary renditions of the Alexandrian past heavily inform Forster's account, occasionally providing its very language, as in his extended Shakespearean treatment on Cleopatra (25-30). Forster says of Cleopatra that "her life [. . .] belongs less to history than to poetry" (28). Finally, much of his interest in the story of the city is literary-historical; he provides lengthy readings of Callimachus, Apollonius of Rhodes, and Theocritus.

However, Forster also claims that literature is itself the key by which the city itself must be understood. Forster claims in his introduction that "[t]he 'sights' of Alexandria are themselves not interesting, but they fascinate when we approach them through the past" (xxvi). For this reason, the story of Alexandria's past precedes the guide, requiring the obedient reader to approach Alexandria quite literally through its history. That story is heavily footnoted and cross-referenced to the subsequent spatial guides, so that the reader may jump forward from a narrative account to a locodescriptive one, or backward to the narrative contextualization of a place.

Forster claims that this footnoting system, by which the forcibly disarticulated synchronic and diachronic halves of his story are complexly sutured back together, is central to his meaning. He writes: "On these references the chief utility of the book depends" (xxvi, italics in original). By hyperlinking narrative to description, past to present, and story to itinerary, Forster imagines for his ideal reader a nonlinear journey through his book that will dialectically inform and be informed by a concurrent walk through the city, a walk in which the past will offer itself dynamically in explanation of otherwise-incomprehensible scenery, and in which that scenery will allow the walker to chart the past from the book's pages onto the living city.

Envisioned as a branching series of textual trajectories, Forster's guide may be viewed as not only literary in character but distinctly modernist, in that it seeks by formal innovation to render comprehensibly a reality not amenable to more traditional modes of novelistic representation. Forster's *Passage to India*, begun before World War I but not finished until after its conclusion and the publication of *Alexandria*, pictures the whole subcontinent as "the hundred Indias that pass each

other” (233) in the streets of Bombay: incomprehensibly multiple and shifting to Western eyes, contained within the concentrated urban space of the metropole but all the more confused and confusing for their concentration. Forster’s guide offers one way of taming and reading the foreign metropolis and the foreign nation.

In one sense, Forster’s narrative is deeply conventional in its artistic approach, inspiring later writers like Lawrence Durrell (author of a preface for the present edition) to read his guide as a primer in fine descriptive observation. But Durrell also claims that in seeing Alexandria when he himself arrived there, “I was able to walk about in the pages of this guide-book” (xvi). For Durrell and later readers, Forster’s book both adapts itself uniquely to its urban setting and, as Durrell suggests, becomes itself the world it proposes to describe, at least for its readers. *Alexandria* is, on such a reading, something like what Joyce once imagined *Ulysses* would be: a self-contained version of its urban setting, capable of surviving or preserving the city in its pages.

Works Cited

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